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Nature of Swearing in Iraqi Arabic Society: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract

There are no argument that swearing is a universal linguistic and psychological phenomenon. Many studies proved that people all over the world and in different times used to swear while talking. Of course, each society has its own way in talking the oath, whether in the expressions used or by some body movements that accompanied swearing. Regardless these differences, swearing almost always is used to achieve a common purpose. The current study sheds the light on this aspect linguistically in Iraqi Arabic society. There would sometimes be a reference to Arab people in general for the similarity between Iraqi and other Arab countries in many respects. Taking into account some shared features with other foreign communities. Religious oaths, swearing by holy people (alive or dead), shrines, times in addition to dear persons were the most elements to be sworn by according to the findings of the study.

Key words: Holy, Iraqi, Oath-Taking, Society, Swearing

History and Meaning of Swearing

Swearing has been a frequent speech act adopted in daily people's conversation as a part of their style. People of different social levels: writers, poets, religious orators, politicians and men in the streets use swearing. They all swear to give more trust and confidence to their speech. Historically, swearing extends back to many centuries and that was recognized in the holy books as Bible and Quran; and also in the verses of ancient poets. This is, in fact, what made this phenomenon to be transferred from one generation to another, from the antecedents to their sons. Thus, it is considered as one of the properties that goes to the heirs. Iraqi society is not exception from this natural human linguistic behavior, especially if we know that Iraqis have one of the most ancient civilization. Moreover, Mesopotamia was the cradle of the culture, science, heaven messages, prophets, etc., accordingly people used to swear as an emphasis to show legitimacy of one's saying (Hudson 2000:24). This does not mean that there are always limited expressions for oath-taking. On the contrary, several factors are involved such as age, education, gender, social class, and so on. Since roots of this phenomenon goes back to many centuries, then it would be preferable to cite some instances of such resources. General, Holy Quran is considered as the best reference to cite from for Arabs due to the great majority are Muslims. This is not restricted to our topic in question, but also to all other linguistic phenomena, where people depend upon in their interpretation. Incidentally, even in pre-Islamic era most people swears were religious expressions. Thus, at that time where people were living in a pagan community, they swear by their idols gods like Hubal, Allat, Al-Eza, Wid, Sewaa, etc.

Oath-taking is found indifferent languages like Hebrew and other Semitic languages. This indicates that swearing is a cultural heritage was passed from the antecedents. In Greek civilization the rebellion orator Demosthenes who headed the opposition against the King Philip made a historical speech that implied oaths as in " By the generous souls of ancient times who endangered their lives in the field of Marathon! By those who encountered the fleets at Salamis! By those who fought at Artemisium! By those courageous warriors who stood arrayed at Plataea! O Æschines, the sons of Athens did not pay homage only to those who prevailed, not only those who were victorious." (Kottak 2006: 93).

Methodology of the Study

1- The Tool

In order to get spontaneous reactions (speech), a sample comprising of (100) Iraqi persons was exposed to natural situations by the researchers. Those people belong to altered ages (young – old), genders (male – female), social status (single – married), education (educated – laymen), social class (poor – rich), etc.

2- The procedures

To achieve the aims of the current study, the researchers have followed the steps below:

1- Passing the (100) selected people in conversations where they have to emphasize, defend, insist, ensure, and convince their rightness, authenticity, or claim. Of course, their responses were accompanied with certain intonation, stress, and pitch to reinforce their stands. Several situations have been created and conducted by the researchers to find out people's reactions; some of these situations are mentioned here:

A. The researchers claimed that the goods is not alright – though this is not correct -, so, the seller tries to prove the reverse and to convince the researcher (as a buyer) through swearing.

B. The researchers denied that they have been told an issue by somebody (though the last told them). So, he replied supporting his answer with swearing.

C. The researchers pretended that they have already informed a person a case (of course they have not). Therefore, the person denied their claim with swearing.

2- Tape recording the conversations via a hidden means and analyzing the data.

3- Investigating the common similarities or any significant variances among them.

Meaning of Swearing

Generally, there are two different senses for the word 'swearing'. The first which is represented by using socially unaccepted expressions in certain situations, when for instance hitting one's finger with a hammer, or burning with small fire or by hot materials. This type includes expressions for cursing (eg. Eat shit, die), profanity (Jesus Christ!, blasphemy, taboo or obscenity (damn). Vulgarisms (wow, look after), expletives (shit). Psychologically, all these expressions are said spontaneously to give a sort of relief mechanism (Labov 1972: 121).

The second meaning of 'swearing' that we are about to in this study has a synonyms to oath-taking. Certain expressions- single words or phrases- are uttered to confirm the truth of one's saying or to give another implications like threat warning, and promise. Such expressions mostly have a shared sense of respect and dignity between the speaker and the listener(s) in spoken language and between the writer and the reader(s) in written language. Therefore swearing and oath-taking will be used as synonyms whenever they are mentioned in this study (Malmkjar 2005: 88).

Purpose of swearing

No human behavior linguistically or non-linguistically occurs in vain unless what comes from insane or drunk people. Therefore, there are aims behind using any discourse and swearing is not excluded. Kiani (1992: 51) mentions more than twenty aims for swearing. To him most important aims are: emphasize a subject, prove the guiltiness and exoneration, make a speech believable, prove claim, assure others, warn and threat others, and excite and encourage others.

As far as our aim of this study is concerned, Arabs often swear to ratify a statement by introducing what guarantees their claim. So, they try to use a common valuable or respectable character or a thing among them. They usually resort to Islamic values and symbols believing that any break of an oath would be dishonor. Nothing than God, the Holy Quran and the prophet Muhammad can unite all Arabs' swearing. What reinforces this orientation that God himself took oaths in Quran many times for several purposes. In fact, God uses oath-taking to confirm his unity and absolute power, and to warn and threat people who do not obey Islamic instructions, otherwise, they will face great punishment. This what make Arabs keep their words and promises when they swear and attempt to convince their audience and/or readers in their claims or speech (Labov 1966: 49).

Types of Swearing

Form and content of swearing depends mostly upon the relationship between the speaker and hearer(s) as well as the social situation. Apparently, all societies perform oath as a requirement for affirmation or taking responsibility and it may be considered a treason or a high crime to betray a sworn oath. In this respect, we try to quote swears from various cultures where necessary. However, swearing can be classified into two main types, formal and informal.

Formal Swearing

Though there are several types of formal swearing, we are going to focus on the most important ones.

1. The Hippocratic Oath: This oath is taken by the physicians in the beginning of practicing their practical career. Historically, this oath goes back to the fourth century B.C. most agree that this oath was written by the father of medicine, the Greek Hippocrates. He witnesses the gods and goddess of the Greek that he will practice his job honestly and faithfully, and to deal with all patients equally, regardless their color, sex, nation, etc.(Eckert and Ginot 2003: 64), it is somehow a long swearing, so we are going to quote the main part of it:

I swear by Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea, and I took to witness All the gods,
all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following oath.
To consider dear to me, as my parents, him who taught me this art; to live in common with him and, if necessary, to share my gods with him, to look upon his children as my own brothers,
to teach them this art. I will prescribe regiments for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone. To please no one will prescribe a deadly drug nor give advice which may cause his death. Nor will I give a women a pessary to procure abortion.

2. A Pauper's Oath: This oath is restricted to the prisoners who are completely destitute, that is without any money. They take this oath so that the court find a lawyer to defend them and it pays the costs. The following is a sample of a Pauper's oath used in United States when establishing indigent status:

I do solemnly swear that I have not any property, real or personal, exceeding \$20, except such as is by law exempt from being taken on civil process for debt; and that I have no property in any way conveyed or concealed, or in any way disposed of, for my future use or benefit. So help me God.

It seems that this oath is not universal due to two reasons. First, not all countries advocate a lawyer to defend the prisoner simply because they consider this crime as well as other as great crimes. Second, communities differ in their religious values and god(s); so which god is intended or adopted according to this form. Moreover, a lot of people all over the world are not believable, so how can their oath be trusted (Hudson 1980: 118).

3. An Oath of Allegiance: In this oath the citizen, male or female, acknowledge their duty of Allegiance and swear loyalty to their monarch or country. In other words, they are ready to defend their principles and sacrifice whatever required to show their love and respect and loyalty to their nation. Recently, people swear to the constitution. This oath is almost taken by people of high rank and positions in the government such as president, prime ministers, ministers, member of parliament, judges, and officers. The following is an example of such oath, which is sworn by members of parliament in the Netherlands:

I swear (affirm) allegiance to the King, to the Statute for the Kingdom of The Netherlands, and to the Constitution. I swear (affirm) that I will faithfully Perform the duties my office lays upon me. So help me god Almighty!

4. An Oath of Offices: Offices in some countries ask their staff member this oath especially those who undertake heavy duties. In other countries this oath is sworn by postgraduate students during the graduation festival, regardless their specialization and even before finding a job. To say it differently, they take this oath whether they are planning to work in the government or privately. Iraq is one of such countries that adopts this oath. Here, they declare their loyalty to their duties and offices (Simpson and Edmund 2010: 178).

Informal Swearing

This sort of swearing occurs in daily conversations between friends, family members, and relatives where no documentation is required. Therefore, no particular form is used. On the contrary, people all over the world swear according to their social environment, beliefs, values, and level of education. People do their best in order to keep their words (oaths) and to implement what they promise or threat to do. From an Islamic view, Allah permits people to break their oath if it has harms to oneself or to others. In such case, Allah punishes the swearer by fasting several days for his oath (Crystal 2003: 112).

What Iraqi people swear by?

We have mentioned earlier that the current study is devoted mainly to the oath taken in Iraqi society. Some of the things or moral values that Iraqi swear by is shared with other Arabic and Islamic countries. Here, they are mentioned almost according to their priority.

1. Allah: People in Iraq, men or women, young or old, educated or not all swear by Allah Almighty. Though there are ninety nine other names and attributes than Allah, people accustomed to swear by this particular name. so, the precede their claims, threat, or condition by phrases such as, by God, by God who creates earth and the sky, etc. Some repeat the name with little or no modification as in by God by God or in Arabic as (والله والله وبالله – والله) (تالله).

2. The Sacred Book: Since the majority of Iraqis are Muslims, so they swear by the Holy Quran literally or by adding an adjective or a relative clause to their oath as in (بالقران – بالقران)

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(الكريم – بكلام الله – بالقرآن الذي أنزل على الرسول); but they seldom swear by a part or a verse of this Holy Book. Minorities in Iraq like Christians, Sabism, and Yazidi they also swear by their Holy Books for the same reasons mentioned before.

3. The Prophets: Among the huge number of prophets and messengers whom sent by Allah to humanity along the history, Iraqis almost always swear by the last prophet, Muhammad. This, definitely does not mean that those people discriminate prophets from each other. Those people often add an attribute to this prophet whenever they mention or swear by showing more respect as in: by the life of the prophet, the messenger of Allah, by the Majesty of Muhammad. It has been observed that Christians in Iraq also swear by Jesus the Christ when they are in need.

4. Shia Imams: Iraq is a heterogeneous community. It has various religions and castes, which means different cultures. According to formal estimation, Shia Muslim caste forms the majority. This caste believes in twelve Imams (infallible ideal leaders). Some Imams were characterizes be a distinctive attribute. So, this large number of people swear by those Imams each according to his own attribute (prisoner, killed thirsty or poisonous, died in strangeness, etc.). Iraqis also swear by Imams' faithful relatives (son, brother, etc.) especially by those who dignity, courage, religious knowledge, and science. Imam Hussein's brother. Al-Abbas is the most figure that people swear by.

5. The Chaste Women: Arabic history is rich with women that most of them are relative to the Shia Imams. Incidentally, here we refer to Arab history, for those women lived in an era where all Arab countries were one state and there were no political boundaries like nowadays. The most familiar of those women are prophet Muhammad's daughter (Fatima), his wife (Khadijah), Jesus Christ's mother (Mary), wife of Pharaoh of Egypt (Asya Bint Muzahim), Imam Ali's wife (Ommolbanin), and others. It is worth to mention that respect and dignity of those women do not spring from their relation to great people, but to their faith and sacrifice's to their religions and God. It is noticeable that Iraqi women swear by those women more than swearing by other holy figures. It may be a kind of solidarity to their gender and social life.

6. Important people: A lot of people in rural areas and remote distance from city center believe highly in the descendants of the prophet Muhammad. People swear in their spirits, even after death. Some of those descendants are women who got great dignity and faith. People had experience with them. In other words, when someone is in trouble, he or she asks god for the sake of those persons to solve the problem or to reduce its bad effect. Through his request most of their demands were answered. Another group of people who use this swear is the uneducated who are too innocents to respect blindly whatever relates to their prophet.

7. Dear Persons and their Moral Values: It is known that the more sincere relation among family members, the more strength relation would be. This love and intimacy evoke them to swear by life of each other, present or absent, dead or alive. It seems that oath-taking within the family is mutual. To say it differently, parents swear by their children's life and children swear by their parents' life and honor.

8. Holy Places and Times: House of God, Al Ka'aba is the holies place to all Muslims all over the world ever found. This surely encourages Iraqis to swear by this sacred place. They also consider shrines of Imams and their relatives no less than their real body and soul, so they treat them as if they are alive. This belief, in fact, does not come from nothing, but due to the Allah's speech. Indeed, there are evidences (verses) from Quran which say that anyone is killed for the sake of god is alive to God's view but ordinary people cannot apprehend this

fact (and do not speak of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead, (they are) alive, but you do not perceive, Q2:154). Arab Muslims have their own yearly calendar. In this calendar certain times (hours, days, months) are considered holier than others. For example, month of Ramadan (fasting month) is more honest than other months; The Grand Night (The angels and Jibreel descend in it by the permission of their Lord, Q97:4) is better than other nights – even better than thousand months; the early morning hour (dawn) is better than other hours of the day. This calls people to choose the holies time for their swearing in order to get more support for their claims and promises (Abdel- Jawad 2000: 83).

9. Food and water: People in Iraq regard food as great blessing denoted from God. So, they wish and work to increase this blessing and at the same time they are aware of losing it. That is why they do not swear by the food unless they are totally satisfied with what they say. Mostly they use salt and bread as representatives of all other types of food. This may be because any food without salt has no taste and also one can hardly do without bread or its derivatives (cake, biscuits, etc.), then, bread is a symbol of all baked goods.

Water has nearly the same value of food to Iraqis. Indeed, water is the origin of every alive creature; this truth was emphasized in the Holy Quran and we made every living thing of water? it is sometimes connected with their third Imam (Al Hussein) who was killed thirsty in the historical famous Kerbala battle.

Swearing and Gender

Many studies in different societies proved that women have language expressions different from men. These differences varies from one society to another relating to several factors like social class, education, prestige, age, and so on. For instance, women are more influenced by the fashion and cosmetics industries, and they recognize color terms better than men. Nevertheless, women language are understood by their fellow men citizen. Women language can be reflected through emphasis on specific linguistic aspects such as more use of polite expressions or through avoiding other linguistic aspects like less use of taboo or profane words. That is simply due to their nature and what society expect from them. Some linguists and psychiatrists go beyond this and claim that women can implement their intentions by bursting into tears or weeping.

It has been noticed that vocabulary differences are the most explicit than other linguistic aspects such as grammar, phonology, etc., women use for their distinctive expressions sometimes accompanied by some body stances and movements when they swear.

Syntactic Structure of Oath Expressions

Though this study is devoted to oath-taking culturally and sociolinguistically, it is necessary to give an idea about the grammatical structure of this linguistic aspect. Often two main expressions are used for swearing 'I swear...' and 'by.....'. These expressions mostly occur initially and are followed by what the speaker swears by to support his or her claim or to give an evidence. The following two examples clarify this view:

By God, this meal is good.

I swear by this food.

It is obvious that the first swearing expression 'by God' is considered expletive, since it is possible to delete it without influence on the basic sentence structure, as in:

This meal is good.

While it is difficult to delete the second swearing expression, that is 'I swear by' without distorting the sentence structure, as in:

This food.

The first deletion does not affect the sentence structure while the second one changed it into a noun phrase, which it may grammatically be acceptable in some languages as in Arabic where the verb is not always necessary in constructing a sentence, but this in turn is unacceptable in other languages like English.

Choosing either form of swearing is a stylistic and personal matter. Going back to our main measurement in oath-taking, that is the Holy Quran, two translated samples into English were taken as examples. Shakir (2009) adopts 'I swear by' expression in his translation for the verse that contains swearing, while the expression 'by' is adopted in the electronic translation (www.E-Quran.com). The following are samples of some oath-taking verses:

- I swear by the time. (والعصر) (103:1)
- By the afternoon.
- I swear by the fig and the olive. (والتين والزيتون) (95:1)
- By the fig and the olive.
- I swear by the early hour of the day. (والضحى) (93:1)
- By the midmorning.
- I swear by the night when it draw a veil. (والليل اذا يغشى) (92:1)
- By the night when it envelops.
- I swear by the sun and its brilliance. (والشمس وضحاها) (91:1)
- By the sun and its midmorning.
- I swear by the day break (والفجر) (89:1)
- By the dawn.
- I swear by the heaven and the comer by night. (والسما والطارق) (86:1)
- By the sky and the nightly comer.
- I swear by the mansions of the stars. (والسما ذات البروج) (85:1)
- By the heaven of the constellations.

It is clear that there is an obvious difference between the two translations in vocabulary. This difference sometimes affect the grammatical structure. This can be seen in translating the word (يغشى), where it is to Shakir (draw) which is a transitive verb and requires an object (a veil), while in the electronic translation is an intransitive verb (envelop) which may take a complement or not.

Is Swearing desirable or not?

Like other human behavior, this linguistic conduct is bound to social factors. Since it is prohibited to use, for example, taboo words in front of children or telling jokes in funeral, taking oath in some situations is not desirable. Rassin and Moris (2005: 34) express this point of view when they regard that swearing is a considerable social behavior which is forbidden under some conditions while it is quite common on others.

From a religious point of view, Islam has already emphasized this orientation through the Quran "do not yield to any mean oath-monger, 86:10). This verse condemns swearing implicitly. In other place God warns believers to avoid swearing explicitly "and do not use God's name as an excuse in your oath, 2:224). In fact, avoiding swearing was mentioned many times in Quran and also by the prophet Muhammad unless there is a necessity. Christianity has the same attitude in this respect, for Jesus forbade taking an oath altogether. This is clear when he says to his followers " let your 'yes' be 'es' and your 'no' be 'no', never swear an oath, Mathew 5:37". Jesus Christ does not address his followers only, but he asks

all not to swear when he says "nor shall we swear by our head, because you cannot make one hair white or black, Mathew 5:36".

Nevertheless, Arabs used to swear too much as long as they are telling the truth. At the same time they feel frightening of false oaths. They believe that false oaths cause adversities to strike them, their lands would be barren, their blessing will be lost. The Iraqi oath-taker puts his owner and religion (of what he swears by) on stake. So, it is advisable either to swear truly or to keep silent. Socially, Iraqis think that the one who takes an oath in every pretty matter proves to be an unserious person and puts himself down no matter he swears by God or anything else. In brief, forbidding swearing is in order to put one's faith in danger. Incidentally, some studies proved that societies vary in range and times of swearing, and the Japanese were the less people using swearing in their daily conversations.

Conclusion

At the end of this analytical study of swearing as a universal phenomenon in general and as a cultural aspect in the Iraqi community in particular, the following points can be drawn:

1. Oath-taking as a linguistic behavior is adopted in daily conversation in all communities with different levels due to several variables like moral and respectable values that certain people admire.

2. Swearing can be classified into three groups: judicial oaths which are taken in the court of law; loyalty, constitutional, or office oaths; and conversational that uttered by people in their daily interactions.

3. Iraqi people are among communities that use swearing too much in their dealings, while some communities rarely or even do not use it, considering it as undesirable linguistic conduct.

4. The highest respectable source of swearing is Allah the creator. Though Allah himself warns people in the Holy Quran to use oath-taking unless necessary. Swearing nowadays is a common place phenomenon in Iraqi community.

5. People often respect informal oath more than formal one, for they believe that breaking informal swearing results in simultaneous punishment.

6. These situations and the researchers' daily observations complete the presupposition that Iraqi community mostly use certain types of swearing in their speech.

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